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Clinton's Creative Turn of a Phrase

"We have the smallest government in 35 years. . ." — Oh, Yeah?

President Clinton, in his State of the Union address last month, claimed we have the smallest government in 35 years. This line has been repeated so often by this administration that it has become a virtual mantra. However, repetition can still not make it accurate. At best, it is the product of creative counting and a very selective memory.

The truth is that President Clinton has proposed increasing the size of government dramatically and has opposed efforts to reduce the size and scope of government throughout his term in office. Where reduction efforts have succeeded — as in the case of welfare reform — they have succeeded in spite of him.

President Clinton: Ever the Proponent of Bigger Government

The federal government is not smaller, but it certainly is smaller than this president intended it to be. Recall what he tried to do before a Republican Congress stepped in to control his appetite for more government, more spending, and more taxes.

- President Clinton's first fiscal act was to try and increase federal spending by pushing a \$16.3 billion pork-barrel bill through Congress under the guise of an "economic stimulus" package. The \$12.2 billion in pork included in the bill was too much even for the Democrat-controlled Congress to swallow and was dropped.
- Clinton's first formal budget (for FY 1994) broke the 1990 spending caps by \$21.3 billion. That same budget produced a \$242 billion tax hike — the largest in history.
- In 1994, President Clinton tried to extend government control to one-seventh of the nation's economy by nationalizing America's health care system. From 1996 through 2004, his plan would have increased federal spending by roughly \$425 billion and added \$136 billion to the deficit — in spite of its \$289 billion in new taxes, said CBO.

President Clinton: Always the Opponent of Smaller Government

And government is smaller than it could have been — had the 1994 congressional elections yielded different results. Without his party controlling Congress, Clinton couldn't pursue more spending, but did continue to oppose spending less:

- In 1995, he vetoed the first balanced budget in a generation and the largest tax cut since President Reagan's term — despite having promised to cut taxes in his 1992 campaign.
- In 1995 and 1996, President Clinton vetoed eight bills that would have reduced spending and the size of government — going so far as to shut down the government twice rather than reduce its size.
- In both 1995 and 1996, Clinton vetoed welfare reform (the first bill would have saved \$94 billion over seven years; the second would have saved \$64 billion over seven years) — despite having promised to “end welfare as we know it” during the 1992 campaign.
- Even after finally agreeing in 1996 to reform welfare (saving \$54.9 billion over six years), he continued to try and put more money back into it — \$15.7 billion in 1997 and somewhere between \$2.4 billion and \$10 billion more this year.

More Creative Ways to Measure the Size of Government

The President has reduced the size of the government “as a percentage of the economy,” said OMB Director Franklin Raines at a House Budget Committee hearing earlier this month. It is just such tricks that made Harry Houdini a legend. He hasn't reduced the size of government in the true sense of the word — *government spends more and taxes more than ever* before. What has happened is that the economy has grown and the government has remained at status quo. The government therefore *appears* to have gotten smaller.

- From 1993 through 1998 (estimates), federal spending has grown 18.5 percent, revenues have grown 44.2 percent and nominal GDP has grown 29.2 percent.
- Government has not only *not* grown smaller, it will consume more than 20 percent of the GDP in federal taxes — an all-time post-WWII high.

Clinton's for Smaller Defense, not Smaller Government

The only part of government really reduced under Clinton has been the civilian work force. Yet even here, to be more accurate, it's not government in general that has gotten smaller, but rather Defense that has been cut, thereby masking Clinton's overall bigger-government appetite.

- From 1993 through 1999 (estimates), Defense discretionary spending has fallen from \$292.4 billion to \$265.1 billion — a 9.3 percent decrease.
- The Defense accounts absorbed 67 percent (222,800) of the 331,000 FTE reductions in federal civilian employment over the same time period.

Clinton: Making a Virtue of Reality and Trying to Claim Credit

The Clinton record divides neatly into two periods: During the 1993-1994 period when Democrats controlled Congress, Clinton tried (and in some cases succeeded) to increase the size of government, spending, and taxes. During the 1995-98 period with Republicans controlling Congress, Clinton has tried to maintain the size of government, spending, and taxes.

Essentially, Clinton has been unable to expand government as much as he wanted to but has prevented government from getting smaller. His assertion that government is smaller is doubly deceptive as it both misrepresents the facts and his role in helping shape them. Clinton has always been "creative" when it comes to government — seeking to create more programs or expand existing ones at every opportunity. Now to hide it, Clinton has taken refuge in yet another creative turn of phrase.

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